CHAPTER THREE

The Gospel of the Kingdom of God

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel'" (Mk 1:14–15). With these words, the Evangelist Mark describes the beginning of Jesus' public activity and at the same time specifies the essential content of his preaching. Matthew, too, sums up Jesus' activity in Galilee in similar terms: "And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people" (Mt 4:23, 9:35). Both Evangelists designate Jesus' preaching with the Greek term *evangelion*—but what does that actually mean?

The term has recently been translated as "good news." That sounds attractive, but it falls far short of the order of magnitude of what is actually meant by the word *evangelion*. This term figures in the vocabulary of the Roman emperors, who understood themselves as lords, saviors, and redeemers of the world. The messages issued by the emperor were called

in Latin *evangelium*, regardless of whether or not their content was particularly cheerful and pleasant. The idea was that what comes from the emperor is a saving message, that it is not just a piece of news, but a change of the world for the better.

When the Evangelists adopt this word, and it thereby becomes the generic name for their writings, what they mean to tell us is this: What the emperors, who pretend to be gods, illegitimately claim, really occurs here—a message endowed with plenary authority, a message that is not just talk, but reality. In the vocabulary of contemporary linguistic theory, we would say that the *evangelium*, the Gospel, is not just informative speech, but performative speech—not just the imparting of information, but action, efficacious power that enters into the world to save and transform. Mark speaks of the "Gospel of God," the point being that it is not the emperors who can save the world, but God. And it is here that God's word, which is at once word and deed, appears; it is here that what the emperors merely assert, but cannot actually perform, truly takes place. For here it is the real Lord of the world—the living God—who goes into action.

The core content of the Gospel is this: The Kingdom of God is at hand. A milestone is set up in the flow of time; something new takes place. And an answer to this gift is demanded of man: conversion and faith. The center of this announcement is the message that God's Kingdom is at hand. This announcement is the actual core of Jesus' words and works. A look at the statistics underscores this. The phrase "Kingdom of God" occurs 122 times in the New Testament as a whole; 99 of these passages are found in the three Synoptic Gospels, and 90 of these 99 texts report words of Jesus.

In the Gospel of John, and the rest of the New Testament writings, the term plays only a small role. One can say that whereas the axis of Jesus' preaching before Easter is the Kingdom of God, Christology is the center of the preaching of the Apostles after Easter.

Does this mean, then, that there has been a falling away from the real preaching of Jesus? Is the exegete Rudolf Bultmann right when he says that the historical Jesus is not really part of the theology of the New Testament, but must be seen as still essentially a Jewish teacher, who, although certainly to be reckoned as an essential presupposition for the New Testament, ought not to be counted as part of the New Testament itself?

Another variant of this alleged gulf between Jesus and the preaching of the Apostles occurs in the now famous saying of the Catholic modernist Alfred Loisy, who put it like this: Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, and what came was the Church. These words may be considered ironic, but they also express sadness. Instead of the great expectation of God's own Kingdom, of a new world transformed by God himself, we got something quite different—and what a pathetic substitute it is: the Church.

Is this true? Is the form of Christianity that took shape in the preaching of the Apostles, and in the Church that was built on this preaching, really just a precipitous plunge from an unfulfilled expectation into something else? Is the change of subject from "Kingdom of God" to Christ (and so to the genesis of the Church) really just the collapse of a promise and the emergence of something else in its place?

Everything depends on how we are to understand the

expression "Kingdom of God" as used by Jesus, on what kind of relationship exists between the content of his proclamation and his person, as the proclaimer. Is he just a messenger charged with representing a cause that is ultimately independent of him, or is the messenger himself the message? The question about the Church is not the primary question. The basic question is actually about the relationship between the Kingdom of God and Christ. It is on this that our understanding of the Church will depend.

Before we delve more deeply into the words of Jesus in order to understand his message—his action and his suffering—it may be useful to take a brief look at how the word *kingdom* has been understood in the history of the Church. We can identify three dimensions in the Church Fathers' interpretation of this key term.

The first dimension is the Christological one. Origen, basing himself on a reading of Jesus' words, called Jesus the *autobasileia,* that is, the Kingdom in person. Jesus himself is the Kingdom; the Kingdom is not a thing, it is not a geographical dominion like worldly kingdoms. It is a person; it is he. On this interpretation, the term "Kingdom of God" is itself a veiled Christology. By the way in which he speaks of the Kingdom of God, Jesus leads men to realize the overwhelming fact that in him God himself is present among them, that he is God's presence.

There is a second way of looking at the significance of the "Kingdom of God," which we could call the idealistic or mystical interpretation. It sees man's interiority as the essential location of the Kingdom of God. This approach to understanding the Kingdom of God was also inaugurated by

Origen. In his treatise *On Prayer,* he says that "those who pray for the coming of the Kingdom of God pray without any doubt for the Kingdom of God that they contain in themselves, and they pray that this Kingdom might bear fruit and attain its fullness. For in every holy man it is God who reigns [exercises dominion, is the Kingdom of God]. . . . So if we want God to reign in us [his Kingdom to be in us], then sin must not be allowed in any way to reign in our mortal body (Rom 6:12). . . . Then let God stroll at leisure in us as in a spiritual paradise (Gen 3:8) and rule in us alone with his Christ" (*Patrologia Graeca* 11, pp. 495f.). The basic idea is clear: The "Kingdom of God" is not to be found on any map. It is not a kingdom after the fashion of worldly kingdoms; it is located in man's inner being. It grows and radiates outward from that inner space.

The third dimension of the interpretation of the Kingdom of God we could call the ecclesiastical: the Kingdom of God and the Church are related in different ways and brought into more or less close proximity.

This last approach, as far as I can see, has gradually come to dominate the field, especially in modern Catholic theology. To be sure, neither the interpretation in terms of man's interiority nor the connection with Christ ever completely disappeared from sight. But nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century theology did tend to speak of the Church as the Kingdom of God on earth; the Church was regarded as the actual presence of the Kingdom within history. By that time, however, the Enlightenment had sparked an exegetical revolution in Protestant theology, and one of the main results of this revolution was an innovative understanding of Jesus' message

concerning the Kingdom of God. This new interpretation immediately broke up into very different trends, however.

One of these was early-twentieth-century liberal theology. Its main spokesman, Adolf von Harnack, saw Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God as a double revolution against the Judaism of Jesus' time. Whereas Judaism focused entirely on the collective, on the chosen people, Harnack held, Jesus' message was strictly individualistic; Jesus addressed the individual, whose infinite value he recognized and made the foundation of his teaching. The second fundamental antithesis, according to Harnack, was this: Whereas ritual worship (and thus the priesthood) had dominated Judaism, Jesus set aside ritual and concentrated his message strictly on morality. Jesus, he argued, was concerned not with ritual purification and sanctification, but with man's soul. The individual's moral action, his works of love, will decide whether he enters into the Kingdom or is shut out of it.

This antithesis between ritual and morality, between the collective and the individual remained influential long after Harnack's time, and it was also widely adopted in Catholic exegesis from about the 1930s on. Harnack himself, though, connected it with his account of the differences between the three major forms of Christianity—the Roman Catholic, the Greek-Slavic, and the Germanic-Protestant—and held that the third of these forms was the one that restored the message of Jesus in its purity. Yet there was also decisive opposition to Harnack within the Protestant world. His opponents insisted that it was not the individual as such who stands under the promise, but the community, and that it is as a member of this community that the individual attains salva-

tion. They pointed out that it is not man's ethical achievement that counts, and they held that the Kingdom of God is, on the contrary, "beyond ethics" and is pure grace, as in their view Jesus' practice of eating with sinners shows particularly clearly (see, for example, K. L. Schmidt, *TDNT*, I, pp. 574ff.).

The great era of liberal theology came to an end with the First World War and the radical change in the intellectual climate that followed it. But there had already been rumblings of a revolution much earlier. The first clear signal of what was to come was a book by Johannes Weiss that appeared in 1892 under the title *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God.* Albert Schweitzer's early exegetical works share the same outlook. Jesus' message, it was now claimed, was radically "eschatological"; his proclamation of the imminent Kingdom of God was a proclamation of the imminent end of the world, of the inbreaking of a new world where, as the term *kingdom* suggests, God would reign. The proclamation of the Kingdom of God, it was argued, must therefore be understood as referring strictly to the end times. Even texts that seemingly contradict this interpretation were somewhat violently made to fit it—for example, the growth parables about the sower (cf. Mk 4:3–9), the mustard seed (cf. Mk 4:30–32), the leaven (cf. Mt 13:33/ Lk 13:20), and the spontaneously sprouting seed (cf. Mk 4: 26–29). The point, it was said, is not growth; rather, Jesus is trying to say that while now our world is small, something very different is about to burst suddenly onto the scene. Here, obviously, theory predominated over listening to the text. Various efforts have been made to transpose Jesus' vision of the imminent end times into the language of modern Christian life, since for us it is not immediately intelligible.

Bultmann, for example, tried to do so in terms of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger—arguing that what matters is an existential attitude of "always standing at the ready." Jürgen Moltmann, building on the work of Ernst Bloch, worked out a "theology of hope," which claimed to interpret faith as an active involvement in the shaping of the future.

Since that time, a secularist reinterpretation of the idea of the Kingdom has gained considerable ground, particularly, though not exclusively, in Catholic theology. This reinterpretation propounds a new view of Christianity, religions, and history in general, and it claims that such radical refashioning will enable people to reappropriate Jesus' supposed message. It is claimed that in the pre–Vatican II period "ecclesiocentrism" was the dominant position: The Church was represented as the center of Christianity. Then there was a shift to Christocentrism, to the doctrine that Christ is the center of everything. But it is not only the Church that is divisive—so the argument continues—since Christ belongs exclusively to Christians. Hence the further step from Christocentrism to theocentrism. This has allegedly brought us closer to the community of religions, but our final goal continues to elude us, since even God can be a cause of division between religions and between people.

Therefore, it is claimed, we must now move toward "regnocentrism," that is, toward the centrality of the Kingdom. This at last, we are told, is the heart of Jesus' message, and it is also the right formula for finally harnessing mankind's positive energies and directing them toward the world's future. "Kingdom," on this interpretation, is simply the name for a world governed by peace, justice, and the conservation of

creation. It means no more than this. This "Kingdom" is said to be the goal of history that has to be attained. This is supposedly the real task of religions: to work together for the coming of the "Kingdom." They are of course perfectly free to preserve their traditions and live according to their respective identities as well, but they must bring their different identities to bear on the common task of building the "Kingdom," a world, in other words, where peace, justice, and respect for creation are the dominant values.

This sounds good; it seems like a way of finally enabling the whole world to appropriate Jesus' message, but without requiring missionary evangelization of other religions. It looks as if now, at long last, Jesus' words have gained some practical content, because the establishment of the "Kingdom" has become a common task and is drawing nigh. On closer examination, though, it seems suspicious. Who is to say what justice is? What serves justice in particular situations? How do we create peace? On closer inspection, this whole project proves to be utopian dreaming without any real content, except insofar as its exponents tacitly presuppose some partisan doctrine as the content that all are required to accept.

But the main thing that leaps out is that God has disappeared; man is the only actor left on the stage. The respect for religious "traditions" claimed by this way of thinking is only apparent. The truth is that they are regarded as so many sets of customs, which people should be allowed to keep, even though they ultimately count for nothing. Faith and religions are now directed toward political goals. Only the organization of the world counts. Religion matters only insofar as it

can serve that objective. This post-Christian vision of faith and religion is disturbingly close to Jesus' third temptation.

Let us return, then, to the Gospel, to the real Jesus. Our main criticism of the secular-utopian idea of the Kingdom has been that it pushes God off the stage. He is no longer needed, or else he is a downright nuisance. But Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of *God*, not just any kind of kingdom. It is true that Matthew speaks of the "Kingdom of the heavens," but the word *heavens* is an alternative expression for the word *God*, which the Jews, with an eye to the second commandment, largely avoided out of reverence for the mystery of God. Accordingly, the phrase "Kingdom of heaven" is not a one-sided declaration of something "beyond": it speaks of God, who is as much in this world as he is beyond it—who infinitely transcends our world, but is also totally interior to it.

There is another important linguistic observation: The underlying Hebrew word *malkut* "is a *nomen actionis* [an action word] and means—as does the Greek word *basileia* [kingdom]—the regal function, the active lordship of the king" (Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie*, I, p. 67). What is meant is not an imminent or yet to be established "kingdom," but God's actual sovereignty over the world, which is becoming an event in history in a new way.

We can put it even more simply: When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God, he is quite simply proclaiming God, and proclaiming him to be the living God, who is able to act concretely in the world and in history and is even now so acting. He is telling us: "God exists" and "God is really God," which means that he holds in his hands the threads of the

world. In this sense, Jesus' message is very simple and thoroughly God-centered. The new and totally specific thing about his message is that he is telling us: God is acting now—this is the hour when God is showing himself in history as its Lord, as the living God, in a way that goes beyond anything seen before. "Kingdom of God" is therefore an inadequate translation. It would be better to speak of God's being-Lord, of his lordship.

We must try now, though, to delineate the content of Jesus' "message of the Kingdom" somewhat more precisely in light of its historical context. The announcement of God's lordship is, like Jesus' entire message, founded on the Old Testament. Jesus reads the Old Testament, in its progressive movement from the beginnings with Abraham right down to his own time, as a single whole; precisely when we grasp this movement as a whole, we see that it leads directly to Jesus himself.

In the first place, the so-called throne-accession Psalms proclaim the kingship of God (YHWH)—a kingship that is understood as extending over the whole of the cosmos and that Israel acknowledges through adoration (cf. Ps 47, 93, 96–99). Since the catastrophes that visited the history of Israel in the sixth century B.C., the kingship of God had become an expression of hope for the future. The Book of Daniel—written in the second century before Christ—does speak of God's lordship in the present, but it mainly proclaims to us a hope for the future, for which the figure of the "son of man" now becomes important, as it is he who is charged with ushering in God's lordship. In the Judaism of Jesus' own time, we meet the concept of divine lordship in the context of the

Temple ritual at Jerusalem and in the synagogue liturgy. We meet the same concept in rabbinic literature and in the Qumran writings. The pious Jew prays every day the Shema Israel: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:4–5, 11:13; cf. Num 15:37–41). The recitation of this prayer was understood as the act of taking on one's shoulders the yoke of God's sovereign lordship. This prayer is not just a matter of words: the one who prays it accepts God's lordship, which consequently, through the act of praying, enters into the world. The one who is praying helps to bear it on his shoulders, and through his prayer, God's lordship shapes his way of life, his day-to-day existence, making it a locus of God's presence in the world.

We see, then, that the divine lordship, God's dominion over the world and over history, transcends the moment, indeed transcends and reaches beyond the whole of history. Its inner dynamism carries history beyond itself. And yet it is at the same time something belonging absolutely to the present. It is present in the liturgy, in Temple and synagogue, as an anticipation of the next world; it is present as a life-shaping power through the believer's prayer and being: by bearing God's yoke, the believer already receives a share in the world to come.

From this vantage point, we can see clearly both that Jesus was a "true Israelite" (cf. Jn 1:47) and also that—in terms of the inner dynamic of the promises made to Israel—he transcended Judaism. Nothing of what we have just discovered is lost. And yet something new is here, something that finds expression above all in such statements as "the

Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1:15), it "has already come upon you" (Mt 12:28), it is "in the midst of you" (Lk 17:21). What these words express is a process of coming that has already begun and extends over the whole of history. It was these words that gave rise to the thesis of "imminent expectation" and made this appear as Jesus' specific characteristic. This interpretation, though, is by no means conclusive; in fact, if we consider the entire corpus of Jesus' sayings, it can actually be decisively ruled out. This is evident from the fact that the exponents of the apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus' Kingdom proclamation (i.e., imminent expectation) are simply forced, on the basis of their hypothesis, to ignore a large number of Jesus' sayings on this matter, and to bend others violently in order to make them fit.

We have already seen that Jesus' message of the Kingdom includes statements expressing its meager dimensions within history. It is like a grain of mustard, the tiniest of all seeds. It is like a leaven, a small quantity in comparison to the whole mass of the dough, yet decisively important for what becomes of the dough. It is compared again and again to the seed that is planted in the field of the world, where it meets various fates—it is pecked up by the birds, or it is suffocated among the thorns, or else it ripens into abundant fruit. Another parable tells of how the seed of the Kingdom grows, but an enemy comes and sows weeds in its midst, which for the present grow up with the seed, with the division coming only at the end (cf. Mt 13:24–30).

Yet another aspect of this mysterious reality of "God's lordship" comes to light when Jesus compares it with a treasure that was buried in a field. The finder of the treasure buries

it again and sells everything in order to buy the field, so to gain possession of the treasure that can fulfill every desire. There is a parallel to this in the parable of the pearl of great price, whose finder likewise gives away everything in order to attain this good of surpassing value (cf. Mt 13:44ff.). Yet another side of the "lordship of God" (Kingdom) comes to light when Jesus makes the enigmatic statement that "the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force" (Mt 11:12). It is methodologically illegitimate to admit only one aspect of the whole as attributable to Jesus and then, on the basis of such an arbitrary claim, to bend everything else until it fits. Instead we should say: The reality that Jesus names the "Kingdom of God, lordship of God" is extremely complex, and only by accepting it in its entirety can we gain access to, and let ourselves be guided by, his message.

Let us examine more closely at least one text that typifies how difficult it is to decipher Jesus' mysteriously coded message. Luke 17:20–21 tells us that, "being asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, 'The Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed [by neutral observers], nor will they say, "Lo, here it is!" or "There!" for behold, the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'" As the interpreters go to work on this text, they reflect here, too, their different approaches to understanding the "Kingdom of God" in general—according to the prior decisions and the basic worldview that each interpreter brings with him.

There is the "idealistic" interpretation, which tells us that the Kingdom of God is not an exterior structure, but is

located in the interiority of man—recall what we heard earlier from Origen. There is truth in this interpretation, but it is not sufficient, even from the linguistic point of view. Then there is the interpretation in the sense of imminent expectation. It explains that the Kingdom of God does not come gradually, so as to be open to observation, but it is suddenly there. This interpretation, however, has no basis in the actual formulation of the text. For this reason, there is a growing tendency to hold that Christ uses these words to refer to himself: He, who is in our midst, is the "Kingdom of God," only we do not know him (cf. Jn 1:30). Another saying of Jesus points in the same direction, although with a somewhat different nuance: "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Lk 11:20). Here (as in the preceding text, for that matter) it is not simply in Jesus' physical presence that the "Kingdom" is located; rather, it is in his action, accomplished in the Holy Spirit. In this sense, it is in and through him that the Kingdom of God becomes present here and now, that it "is drawing near."

Thus the following solution presents itself, albeit in a preliminary way that has to be explored further in the entire course of our attentive listening to Scripture. The new proximity of the Kingdom of which Jesus speaks—the distinguishing feature of his message—is to be found in Jesus himself. Through Jesus' presence and action, God has here and now entered actively into history in a wholly new way. The reason why *now* is the fullness of time (Mk 1:15), why *now* is in a unique sense the time of conversion and penance, as well as the time of joy, is that in Jesus it is God who draws

near to us. In Jesus, God is now the one who acts and who rules as Lord—rules in a divine way, without worldly power, rules through the love that reaches "to the end" (Jn 13:1), to the Cross. It is from this center that the different, seemingly contradictory aspects can be joined together. In this context we understand Jesus' statements about the lowliness and hiddenness of the Kingdom; in this context we understand the fundamental image of the seed, which we will be considering again in various ways; in this context we also understand his invitation to follow him courageously, leaving everything else behind. He himself is the treasure; communion with him is the pearl of great price.

This interpretation now also sheds light on the tension between ethics and grace, between the strictest personalism and the call to enter a new family. When we consider the Messiah's Torah in the Sermon on the Mount, we will see several strands coming together: freedom from the Law; the gift of grace; and the "greater righteousness," that is, the "surplus" of righteousness that Jesus demands of his disciples beyond the righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes (cf. Mt 5:20). In the meantime, let us consider just one example: the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, both of whom pray in the Temple in their very different ways (cf. Lk 18:9–14).

The Pharisee can boast considerable virtues; he tells God only about himself, and he thinks he is praising God in praising himself. The tax collector knows he has sinned, he knows he cannot boast before God, and he prays in full awareness of his debt to grace. Does this mean, then, that the Pharisee represents ethics and the tax collector represents grace without ethics or even in opposition to ethics? The real point is not

the question "ethics—yes or no?" but that there are two ways of relating to God and to oneself. The Pharisee does not really look at God at all, but only at himself; he does not really need God, because he does everything right by himself. He has no real relation to God, who is ultimately superfluous—what he does himself is enough. Man makes himself righteous. The tax collector, by contrast, sees himself in the light of God. He has looked toward God, and in the process his eyes have been opened to see himself. So he knows that he needs God and that he lives by God's goodness, which he cannot force God to give him and which he cannot procure for himself. He knows that he needs mercy and so he will learn from God's mercy to become merciful himself, and thereby to become like God. He draws life from being-in-relation, from receiving all as gift; he will always need the gift of goodness, of forgiveness, but in receiving it he will always learn to pass the gift on to others. The grace for which he prays does not dispense him from ethics. It is what makes him truly capable of doing good in the first place. He needs God, and because he recognizes that, he begins through God's goodness to become good himself. Ethics is not denied; it is freed from the constraints of moralism and set in the context of a relationship of love—of relationship to God. And that is how it comes truly into its own.

The "Kingdom of God" is a theme that runs through the whole of Jesus' preaching. We can therefore understand it only in light of that preaching as a whole. In turning our attention now to one of the core elements of Jesus' preaching—the Sermon on the Mount—we will find there a deeper development of the themes that we have barely touched upon

here. Above all, what we will see in the next chapter is that Jesus always speaks as the Son, that the relation between Father and Son is always present as the background of his message. In this sense, God is always at the center of the discussion, yet precisely because Jesus himself is God—the Son—his entire preaching is a message about the mystery of his person, it is Christology, that is, discourse concerning God's presence in his own action and being. And we will see that this is the point that demands a decision from us, and consequently this is the point that leads to the Cross and the Resurrection.